

WATER BIRDS IN A DRY LAND

BY WALTER E. LEWIS

I am located on the border of the Great American Desert. The bleak and windswept plains stretch westward to the base of the towering Rockies. The casual observer might say, as many have said, "Here there are no birds". At any rate, one might expect to find only the hardier birds, such as the native sparrows and the meadow lark, or the soaring eagle. Truly, these are all here, but the surprising discovery that the investigator makes is the relative abundance of water birds in this generally arid and treeless country. The explanation is, that while ours is a dry country, it is wet in spots.

My location is in northwestern Oklahoma, a little south of the Kansas boundary and on the line where the Panhandle is joined to the main part of the state. The Cimarron River, noted for its quicksands and its shifting channels, flows in an easterly direction a few miles to the north of me, while Beaver Creek, a main tributary of the North Canadian, comes down from the distant mountains of New Mexico a few miles to the south. Between these two streams is a flat, some dozen miles across that has no drainage outlet to either stream. The water from heavy rains falling on this territory collects in shallow fresh water ponds.

These ponds vary in size from a few acres to several hundred acres. Between heavy rains they may go dry, but the largest one, located about two and one-half miles northeast of the village of Gate, has contained water for more than five years at a time. During such a period it becomes stocked with fish, while snails, toads, and numerous forms of aquatic insects and plants are abundant. Thus it is that conditions are often favorable for the presence of large numbers and varieties of water birds.

My list of identifications numbers some fifty species of shore and water birds. I do not claim to include all the forms that visit this locality, as my bird study is carried on simply for the fun of it and as a minor accompaniment to my business of farming. Then, too, I do not collect. Living beauty interests me more than a specimen with a catalogue number. I would rather be baffled by a living mystery than to have a dead certainty lying on its back with its feet in the air. Of course this is utterly unscientific, but then I do not claim to be a scientist, merely a lover of birds. My list is, therefore, smaller because I have included only those birds whose identification has been positive and unquestionable, and have excluded a number of probabilities.

LIST

EARED GREBE. *Colymbus nigricollis californicus*. This form has been seen only once. On May 7, 1924, five individuals were seen on the largest lake.

PIED-BILLED GREBE. *Podilymbus podiceps*. The only record of this interesting diver is one seen May 15, 1927.

HERRING GULL. *Larus argentatus*. In December, 1921, six of these gulls appeared on the big lake, which was swarming with little fish, and stayed all through the winter. At least two of them were shot by hunters. I have seen none since.

RING-BILLED GULL. *Larus delawarensis*. There are two records of this, once on May 20, 1921, near the big lake, and again March 24, 1924. This was a very windy day and the gull was flying about in the fields apparently in some difficulty because of the high wind.

FRANKLIN'S GULL. *Larus franklini*. This splendid friend of the farmer is a regular visitor here. In the spring time it fearlessly follows the farmer as he works the ground. Very few insects thus exposed escape. When there is water in the lake the gulls gather in the autumn in great numbers, appearing in September or October. They spend their nights on the lake, streaming off in the morning to search for grasshoppers in the wheat fields. During their stay here they visit in turn all the fields within twenty-five or thirty miles. They are very thorough in their work and, as the flock sometimes numbers 20,000 individuals, they can do a vast amount of good in destroying insect pests.

FORSTER'S TERN. *Sterna forsteri*. These graceful birds are occasional visitors and may be seen skimming over lake or river.

LEAST TERN. *Sterna antillarum*. This is a summer resident and may generally be seen near the old swimming hole on Horse Creek, a small tributary of the Cimarron.

BLACK TERN. *Chlidonias nigra surinamensis*. These useful birds are regular migrants and summer visitors with us. They are faithful in scanning the freshly turned earth in the fields in search of insects. About the middle of May, 1912, an unusually large number passed in migration. It was toward the middle of the day when my attention was accidentally directed upward and I discovered a remarkable flight. At a height of about one thousand feet a stream of Black Terns about one-quarter of a mile wide was rapidly flying northward. I could distinguish their calls like the faint barking of prairie dogs. The flight continued for more than half an hour during which time count-

less thousands of individuals passed on their way to their northern breeding grounds.

WHITE PELICAN. *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*. This imposing-looking bird is a regular migrant here, generally in small numbers but occasionally in large flocks. In the spring of 1923 a flock of 250 or more rested over night on the big lake. It was a magnificent, never-to-be-forgotten spectacle. About nine o'clock the next morning the great birds resumed their northern flight. Ten years ago a hunter from the neighboring village crippled a pelican in one wing and captured it. He took it home and cared for it. It readily became domesticated and made itself entirely at home. The village dogs, seeing this great strange bird walking about, thought to attack it, but a few blows from its great beak soon convinced them that they had no business with it. It would eat quite a variety of food, but only when there were bones in it. One day it went visiting to a neighbor's house and the lady of the house set out a pan of gravy for it to eat. It scooped up the panful into its capacious pouch then, finding there was no bone in it, stepped deliberately over to a tub of rain water that the lady had caught for washing her hair. It plunged its beak into the water and thoroughly washed out the offending gravy. The pelican was kept domesticated for eight months when, unhappily, it ate some poisoned meat intended for dogs, and died.

AMERICAN MERGANSER. *Mergus americanus*. This fish duck is a common migrant here. I have seen it especially in the spring-fed bayous along the Cimarron where fish are always abundant.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER. *Mergus serrator*. This is a rare migrant, as I have seen only one here.

MALLARD. *Anas platyrhynchos*. This fine duck is a common migrant in large numbers. It furnishes a large percentage of the great flocks of ducks that we often have here when the lakes are full. While very often they are present in immense numbers. I believe that the latter part of February, 1921, showed the greatest flocks in my observation. They rested in the day time, as is their custom, in a fairly compact mass toward the middle of the lake, covering probably twenty-five or thirty acres, with at least a thousand birds to the acre, and flew out to their feeding grounds in the fields just as dusk came on. The ducks here like to feed on the grain fields of milo and kafir, and in the autumn often do great damage to fields where the stalks have broken over or been blown down, so that the head of grain is on the ground. A flock of five or ten thousand hungry ducks can well-nigh destroy a field of grain in a few nights. Not only do they eat the

grain but they pull the head to pieces and scatter it about so that it is wasted. When the ducks once start in on a field it is almost impossible to keep them out until it is destroyed. Of course the Mallard is not to blame for all this damage but as it makes up a large part of the duck population it will have to take its share of blame. Sometimes Mallards have been known to nest here.

BALDPATE. *Mareca americana*. This is not a common duck but it has been seen several times.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL. *Nettion carolinense*. These little fellows are very common here. They bunch up so on the water that they are an easy mark for the hunter. I once saw fifty-five birds that were taken with five shots of a pump gun, while another hunter secured twenty-three with one shot.

BLUE-WINGED TEAL. *Querquedula discors*. These are the most commonly seen of all ducks as they are here a large proportion of the time and are much less shy than some of the others. Quite a number stay around until the first of June and some regularly nest here. By August numbers of them are back from the north. They are the last to leave and the first to return, but do not stay during the colder part of the winter.

CINNAMON TEAL. *Querquedula cyanoptera*. This duck has apparently not been observed elsewhere in Oklahoma, but I have seen two specimens obtained by hunters, one in November, 1920, the other the following year.

SHOVELLER. *Spatula clypeata*. The black head, white chest, and chestnut sides of these handsome ducks are familiar sights to the hunters in this section. While these birds are generally seen in pairs they often congregate in flocks, and form a goodly proportion of the duck population here.

PINTAIL. *Dafila acuta tzitzihua*. These large ducks are very common in the fall, winter, and spring, and more than one season have nested near a quiet pool on Horse Creek.

REDHEAD. *Marila americana*. Large numbers of these choice ducks annually visit here.

CANVAS-BACK. *Marila valisineria*. These are much less common than the Redhead, and most of what hunters call Canvas-backs prove on investigation to be Redheads.

LESSER SCAUP DUCK. *Marila affinis*. These are not ordinarily very numerous, but October 28, 1925, a flock of probably two thousand of them was observed.

AMERICAN GOLDEN EYE. *Glaucionetta clangula americana*. Only

once have I seen this rare duck. On November 20, 1920, I saw one on a small pond in the pasture near my home. It was in company with several scaup ducks. Its diving habits were plainly noticeable.

BUFFLE-HEAD. *Charitonetta albeola*. This duck, too, I have seen but once. On April 10, 1924, a youngster, disregarding the mandate of Uncle Sam, shot and brought in a specimen of this duck.

LESSER SNOW GOOSE. *Chen hyperboreus hyperboreus*. While not so common as they were fifteen years ago, these beautiful white geese with black-tipped wings are fairly regular in migration. They are less wary than the Canada Geese and suffer more from hunters, both on that account and because they are so conspicuous. They like to feed on green wheat, and a flock of them in a green field make a striking and beautiful sight, like a drift of snow on a green background.

WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE. *Anser albifrons gambeli*. This rather uncommon goose I have observed three different years. They have been solitary individuals except in the fall of 1920 when a flock of about twenty was seen. Early in October, 1924, a lone goose was seen in my wheat field. There was considerable volunteer wheat growing on the ground, that attracted the goose when I discovered it. In the same field I was drilling wheat around a "land", and whenever the drill passed the place where the feeding was the best the goose would fly away to another part of the field. As soon as I was gone it would come back, and repeat the performance with each round. As I worked in that field for two or three days it became noticeably tamer, showing less and less alarm, until it would fly only a few rods to get out of the way of the team. It stayed around for about three weeks, grazing on the wheat in the day time and spending the night on a small pond in the adjacent pasture. All this time it was within plain sight of the house and close to where we were working and choring. It finally became so tame that several times I walked past it within a distance of two rods without alarming it. It would raise its head and look at me, but as I passed on it would quietly resume its feeding. At last one night we heard it give its farewell squawk, bidding us adieu as it resumed its wandering; sure enough, in the morning the pond was vacant and we saw the bird no more.

CANADA GOOSE. *Branta canadensis canadensis*. When we hear the honk of the Canada Goose in the late fall we know that the time has come to make everything snug and secure, for it is the forerunner of an approaching north. Except in the most severe weather, it stays here throughout the winter. These geese are wary and suspicious and not easily shot by hunters. The usual method of hunting them here

is to locate them in the middle of a level wheat field, dash upon them with a speedy motor car and shoot them before they can get under way and out of gunshot. Ordinarily a flock will consist of twenty or thirty birds, but I have seen as many as two hundred in a flock.

BLACK BRANT. *Branta nigricans*. On April 2, 1922, I saw a Black Brant in a flock of fifty Canada Geese feeding on the wheat in my field. This is my only record of this form, and as far as I know the only one reported from Oklahoma.

AMERICAN BITTERN. *Botaurus lentiginosus*. This ungainly bird with its weird call is a common summer resident here. It breeds regularly in the bog along the Cimarron where cat-tails, canebrake, and tall three-cornered grass furnish ample cover and protection. In wet seasons it also nests around the ponds on the uplands.

GREAT BLUE HERON. *Ardea herodias*. The Great Blue Herons are a familiar sight here throughout the summer. They regularly nest along the Cimarron. With their slow, flapping flight they fly across to the shallow lakes of the upland, where toads and insects are abundant. I have seen as many as nineteen individuals at a time on one pond.

LITTLE BLUE HERON. *Florida coerulea*. One individual was seen in late summer in the bog along the Cimarron.

BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON. *Nycticorax nycticorax naevius*. A flock of thirteen of these noisy squawkers was seen sitting in the top-most branches of a large cottonwood tree in a grove on Horse Creek. March 17, 1921.

WHOOPING CRANE. *Grus americana*. Fairly large flocks of these beautiful white birds were seen in 1909, 1910, and 1911. In the fall of 1912 a single individual was seen and since that none have been here. Apparently their fatal gift of beauty has doomed them to extermination.

SANDHILL CRANE. *Grus mexicana*. Some bright, sunshiny day in the first week in October we are sure to hear the rolling bugle call of the Sandhill Cranes. By looking carefully in the direction of the sound we can at last see the glint of the sun's rays on the distant flock. As the birds soar in wide sweeping circles they are nearly invisible at a distance of two or three miles except when they turn so that the rays of the sun are reflected from their feathers. When first heard they are probably half a mile high and two or three miles away, yet their powerful call comes clear and melodious. When they are close overhead another note can be distinguished, a kind of hissing undertone that in a large flock is almost constant. Cranes are generally seen in flocks of from thirty to sixty, but in the spring of 1923 I saw

a flock of 275 pasturing on my growing wheat; and in early October, 1926, a flock of more than three hundred passed over.

VIRGINIA RAIL. *Rallus virginianus*. This shy and elusive bird of the marshes sometimes nests in the bog along the Cimarron, and I have seen the young half-grown birds there.

BLACK RAIL. *Creciscus jamaicensis*. The only individual that I have seen I caught alive in my garden following a heavy rain in the early fall of 1915.

AMERICAN COOT. *Fulica americana*. Mud hens are very common in fall and spring, and several nest here during the summer. Being undisturbed by hunters, they are quite tame, and show little fear of man. When they do take to the air at last, after much kicking and splashing, they do not ordinarily fly far, but settle down again into the water.

WILSON'S PHALAROPE. *Steganopus tricolor*. This delicately colored and very interesting bird is always present in large numbers in migration. The larger size and brighter coloration of the female is a unique and striking characteristic of these birds. They feed in the shallow margins of the ponds or in roadside ditches and barrow-pits. A peculiar feature of their conduct is their propensity to turn round and round like a whirling dervish, or like a dog chasing its tail. The individuals that I have watched seem to prefer a counter-clockwise direction, though occasionally the movement is in the opposite direction.

AVOCET. *Recurvirostra americana*. Few birds are more beautiful than this wading bird with the upcurved bill. The rich cinnamon of its head and chest, and the contrasting black and white of its body, make a picture not soon to be forgotten. Near the first of May, 1925, a flock of about ten appeared in my pasture pond. They were not especially shy, and permitted observers to approach within a few rods to admire their graceful movements and their exquisite coloration. A caller to whom I showed them could scarcely believe that objects of such grace and beauty could be seen here. I had previously seen small flocks on April 24, 1921, and May 20, 1922, and since then, one bird about April 27, 1927, and three August 14.

WILSON'S SNIPE. *Gallinago delicata*. The "jack" snipe is a regular and fairly common migrant here.

LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER. *Limnodromus griseus scolopaceus*. On May 7, 1924, I saw a flock of fifteen of these birds on the margin of the big lake. They were busily engaged feeding on the small insects along the water's edge and paid little attention to me until I was within about twenty feet of them, when they flew away a short distance.

BAIRD'S SANDPIPER. *Pisobia bairdi*. This common and regular migrant is seen in the shallow pond and on the mud flats in company with the Least Sandpiper and the Yellow-legs.

LEAST SANDPIPER. *Pisobia minutilla*. Shore birds in general are shy and retiring but the Least Sandpipers seem to have little fear of man. They are so intent on their business of picking up their dinner that I have often passed within a few feet of them without causing alarm.

SEMIPALMATED SANDPIPER. *Ereunetes pusillus*. I have only one record of this bird. One was found impaled on a barb of a wire fence. June 2, 1922. Apparently this was the work of a shrike.

GREATER YELLOW-LEGS. *Totanus melanoleucus*. When several of these attractive birds alight on a pond and gracefully raise their wings above their heads in the shore-birds' salute, they make a very pretty picture. They are not very common in migration, but nearly every year I see them.

LESSER YELLOW-LEGS. *Totanus flavipes*. This smaller form is rather more numerous in migration than the Greater Yellow-legs.

WESTERN WILLET. *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus inornatus*. I have seen this bird only once. September 4, 1921, one individual was discovered on the shallow pond in my pasture. The strongly contrasting white and dark gray plumage, visible when it flies, makes it a striking and noticeable bird. Its loud call is unmistakable.

BARTRAMIAN SANDPIPER. *Bartramia longicauda*. These birds pass in the spring migration, but are not absent long, as they return in July, sometimes by the first of the month. They spend their time in the wheat stubble-fields. They are not timid birds and show little fear of the farmer as he works his wheat ground. Their whistle is a familiar summer bird-note here.

LONG-BILLED CURLEW. *Numenius americanus*. The relatively enormous length of bill of these remarkable birds renders them unmistakable when seen, while the loud cry from which the name is derived cannot be confused with any other sound. They appear here nearly every spring, sometimes singly, but often in larger flocks. In the spring of 1926 I saw a flock of some twenty, picking and probing about on the prairie.

AMERICAN BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER. *Squatarola squatarola cynosurae*. On August 18, 1925, a single individual of this species was observed on my convenient pasture pond. It is a very striking looking bird because of its black under parts. The white at the base of

the tail that distinguishes it in the field from the Golden Plover was plainly visible. As far as I know this is the first record of this bird in Oklahoma. On May 14, 1927, two individuals were seen on the same pond where the first was discovered.

GOLDEN PLOVER. *Pluvialis dominica dominica*. Since this remarkable voyager goes south by the ocean route, the spring migration is the only opportunity for its observation. I have seen it once, on May 18, 1922, when six individuals were seen on the shore of the big lake.

KILLDEER. *Oxyechus vociferus*. The first week in March seldom fails to show the arrival of the first Killdeer. Everyone is familiar with the Killdeer, the most common and the most noisy of the shore birds. The daylight hours are not enough for their never-ending clack; often on moonlight nights they fly about to tell the world of their troubles. Of course at nesting-time they are very solicitous of intruders and feign the most desperate injuries to lead them astray. They are, however, nimble cripples, and can always escape, no matter how hard pressed. I do not wonder that they are proud of their brood, for very attractive are the little fluffy balls that trot around in the mother's wake.

SNOWY PLOVER. *Charadrius nivosus*. I found a parent bird with young running about on the sand flats along the bed of the Cimar-ron River, July 28, 1922. The young ones were still so small that they were readily caught. The parent seemed much distressed while the little ones were captive and when they were released led them hurriedly away.

As will be noticed from the list more than one-third of the species of water birds are ducks and geese. In numbers of individuals, too, I presume they make up fully as large a proportion. When the lakes are full this is a veritable hunters' paradise and sportsmen come for hundreds of miles to take advantage of it. Probably another third of individuals are gulls and terns, while the remainder is made up of all the other species.

None of the water birds are all the year residents, but there is no time, excepting the most severe winter weather, when some interesting species are not present, adding variety and beauty to the avifauna, and multiplying the pleasure of the lover of birds.

GATE, OKLA.